

University's construction project stirs older debate

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BELTON - As the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor prepares to launch its latest construction projects, the issue of the college's continued expansion still concerns some residents dedicated to preserving the city's history.

The university plans to hold a groundbreaking Friday for its 8,000- to 10,000-seat stadium and attached student union building, south of the Frank and Sue Mayborn Campus Center on University Drive.

"(The facility) will continue to enhance our very strong school spirit," said Randy O'Rear, the university's president, about the \$50 million complex. "Students will be able to walk out (of) their dorm rooms and apartments to the games, and hear the roar of crowds on their campus."

O'Rear said the football stadium and 100,000-square-foot student union represented the culmination of the first phase of the university's master plan, a \$100 million package passed by the board almost a year ago.

But fulfilling the university's master plan has not always garnered approval of some Belton residents, specifically those seeking to preserve the area's historical buildings.

Last year, the university clashed with the city's Heritage Preservation Board after it was denied permits to demolish two homes in Belton's historic West Residential District.

The university filed a lawsuit to appeal the decision. In July, the city council unanimously approved a moratorium on the ordinance that created the preservation board, effectively allowing the disputed demolition.

Grow or preserve?

While constructing the stadium and student union won't require the destruction of any homes, it has once again highlighted a tug-of-war between the need for growth in Belton and the desire for historic preservation.

"I don't think the problem is with expansion. It's a problem with destroying history," said Nancy Kelsey, a local historian who was an outspoken critic of the moratorium. "The perception that came out of that was that (the council) was willing to bend the rules instead of enforce the guidelines."

Belton's zoning commission approved earlier this month a recommendation that would allow the university to begin construction on the project.

Belton City Manager Sam Listi said the commission changed the zoning of the land where the construction will take place from "university campus" to "planned development."

However, the city council still needs to vote to approve the recommendation for the university to get the official green light to begin building.

Listi said the item is on the agenda for Feb. 14, 11 days after the groundbreaking.

O'Rear said the groundbreaking is only ceremonial and was scheduled for Friday because it coincided with a meeting of the university's board of regents.

When questioned about the past clashes with the preservation board, O'Rear said the university was committed to keeping its campus and facilities aesthetically pleasing.

"Even those that have significant concerns about growth of the university would also agree that it is a tremendous asset to the community," O'Rear said. "I think we do a wonderful job maintaining an attractive campus, which enhances the community, and as (the university) continues to grow, the community will benefit."

Construction continues

While the expansion-historic debate continues, so will the construction at the university.

O'Rear said the university will move on to renovating some of its other facilities as the stadium is completed. The next major project is the construction of a performing arts center.

Rae Schmuck, a member of Belton's Heritage Preservation Board, said communication and compromise would be the key to resolving the tension between city growth and historic preservation.

"Generally speaking, I do think we can find a balance," said Schmuck. "If we can work together, I think there is a lot of potential."

"We have a vision that (the university) will be the university of choice for Christian higher education in the southwest," O'Rear said. "It's a bold, long-term vision that has guided all the decisions we make."

Construction on the stadium and student union is expected to begin in March and completed in fall 2013.

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